

Support New Cool Local Businesses

My wife and I are vegetarians. We're always on the lookout for creative tasty food made of ingredients that never had a face.

When eating at a restaurant outside of our home town, often one of us will say: "Wow, this dish is terrific. There's nothing like it anywhere in Salem, and here we are in much smaller [Corvallis, Bend, Ashland, wherever]."

So what's the deal? Salem is just a few thousand people away from being the second biggest city in Oregon. Yet we lack many cool businesses that residents of much smaller towns are able to enjoy.

Seems to be a chicken and egg problem.

A cool business won't expand into Salem unless it can be sure there are enough cool-appreciating people in the area who will patronize it. But Salem isn't going to attract more cool-appreciating people so long as this town deserves its So-lame nickname.

Recently my wife visited a Portland branch of a large national chain that oodles of Salemites would love to have here. She asked about plans to come to Salem.

"Not going to happen. Salem doesn't have the right demographics for us. For example, lots of state government executives work in Salem and live in Portland." True, along with many other well-paid cool-appreciating people.

I thought of this when I read an opinion piece by Larry Tokarski in Salem's non-alternative newspaper. Tokarski heads up the company that is developing the old Boise Cascade property on the riverfront.

Tokarski spoke about how excited he was in 2006 when the Urban Land Institute presented a vision that included "an appealing mix of restaurants, shops, grocery, hotel, residential and office uses."

Among other reasons that prevented this vision from becoming reality, Tokarski cites "multiple limitations regarding our market." I translated that as: not enough cool people able and willing to patronize cool businesses.

Yes, Salem's per capita income (\$23,162) is markedly below the Oregon average (\$26,561). But Salem is above Corvallis (\$22,870), which has about one-third as many people.

So how did Corvallis get a Trader Joe's before Salem? More cool-appreciating people? But I find it hard to believe this was the only reason, given Salem's much larger size.

My theory is this: there's plenty of Salemites eager to support creative, cutting-edge, Wow! inducing businesses.

However, we don't do a great job of patronizing the ones we already have. Who killed Jackson's Books? Me. Along with everybody else who started buying via Amazon rather than our own independent book store.

If you hear about a new cool business, check it out. Expand your horizons. Break some habits. Buy local as much as possible.

Developers like Tokarski need to do their part also. Take a chance on Salem. Not recklessly. Confidently. Remember "If you build it, he will come." She, too.

I hope Tokarski will rethink being content with a medical rehab facility and apartments on Salem's riverfront. That isn't cool.

Strange Up Salem seeks to lift our city's Blah Curse. Give us a Facebook like. Brian Hines blogs at hinesblog.com